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Distributive leadership as an emerging concept

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Educators today work in a context of perceived overload. In saying ‘perceived’, I am not denying the reality of social complexity, political agendas and unprecedented social change, and the effects that all of this has on school life.

However, one dominant perception can shoulder out others that are even more significant. It can define a collective mindset and inhibit creative responses to challenges.

It is so tempting to see ourselves as being on a rollercoaster ride over which we have no control; all we can do is hang on and submit to external pressures. Everything can become filtered through the lens of overload.

Before long, we can find ourselves taking our eyes off the core business of school – quality learning and teaching – and becoming preoccupied with bits and pieces, with the latest fad, with measurable fragments, and with efficiency and compliance for their own sake. In a changing context, this mindset can offer some measure of comfort and certainty.

Yet, if schools are to become more effective, educational leaders must rise above the melee with its competing demands for attention and priority, and lead the school community in focussing on the core work.

In this article, I want to consider an emerging concept of school leadership which can be a powerful instrument for dealing with perceived overload and its offspring – fragmentation and blurred vision.

Leadership and school effectiveness

Today we witness a strengthening focus on the links between leadership and school effectiveness. Increasingly, research findings has been associating school leadership with the quality of learning and teaching, the motivation of teachers and the ethos of the school (e.g. Fullan, 2001; Hopkins, 2000; Sergiovanni, 2001; West et al, 2000).

Does this provide a window of opportunity for the hard-working leader, who seeks to focus more sharply? Or is it just another 'enthusiasm' that will only add to the workload?

What kind of leadership?

School leadership has proved to be a somewhat elusive concept. Much research time has certainly been devoted to it, but the many different theories and perspectives surrounding this research do not easily translate into a framework useful in creating more effective schools.

In recent years, there has been a very significant shift of focus from the roles, characteristics, behaviours and skills of the *one* leader in the school to leadership as *a function of the school as a whole* (e.g. Gronn, 2002; Morrison, 2002). This has given currency to the term 'distributive leadership' which shares elements implicit in a range of popular descriptions, such as 'shared leadership', 'parallel leadership', 'teacher leadership' and 'collaborative leadership'.

One reason for the emergence, and popularity, of the term is the increasing amount of research indicating that improved learning outcomes of students are more likely when a sense of leadership is distributed throughout the school, and teachers feel empowered (e.g. Glickman et al, 2001).

How is distributive leadership best understood?

Distributive leadership is not simply an organisational arrangement. It is certainly not a process whereby a principal delegates responsibilities to others. Rather, it is more of a mindset or a perspective which can find expression in different ways. Spillane *et al* (2004), for instance, stress the *social* dimension through which the work of various individuals expresses itself, collectively, as a leadership function.

Essential to it is an ethos of shared responsibility which, in turn, encourages initiatives serving a common purpose. It flourishes in a climate of trust, support and openness to new learning.

Put simply, distributive leadership involves the leadership functions of a school being shared by many people in ways that strengthen the whole school community, intensifying a sense of engagement and shared responsibility while making the workload more manageable.

Distributive leadership widens the basis for decision-making and creates a flatter administrative structure. As a result, each individual has greater opportunities to contribute to the common good in ways that will enhance learning and teaching as well as the organisational effectiveness of the school. At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that such factors as inertia, over-cautiousness and insecurity will inhibit some individuals from responding positively to challenges accompanying leadership opportunities of this kind. (Harris & Muijs, 2004)

This general approach really belongs within an overall conceptual framework which supports a shared vision and such values as fairness, equity, inclusion and respect. If

it is to be more than a feel-good expression, it must become an integral part of the *culture* of the school.

Fruits of distributive leadership

Where a distributive leadership mindset is embraced, and its opportunities are responded to, the principal is able to be more selective in devoting time to those leadership functions, for example in the cultural domain, which may have a significant strategic impact on the life of the school.

There are likely to be very positive consequences for staff, also. Opportunities to exercise initiative and responsibility in an encouraging environment can greatly assist in the professional development of individuals. Staff morale and the relational side of school life generally can be enhanced. Important though all of this is, it is secondary to the anticipated improved learning outcomes of students, resulting from the development of new pedagogies and learning arrangements that are in harmony with contemporary understanding of what constitutes and contributes to quality learning and teaching.

Practical applications

The research and associated discussion surrounding distributive leadership have direct implications for school leaders. Here are some suggestions that seem to be consistent with findings:

- Develop with colleagues a shared understanding of the term. Remember, in the first instance, distributive leadership is a perspective, mindset or set of attitudes, rather than a new organisational arrangement, although this may come later.
- Help others to see where distributive leadership fits appropriately within the vision and mission of the school. At its most effective, it is a practical consequence of existing rhetoric.
- Remember that distributive leadership will only thrive in a climate of openness, trust and interdependence where there is plenty of professional conversation and shared practice, and where collaboration is experienced as professionally rewarding and personally satisfying.
- Lead in the clarification of roles and essential responsibilities, and in establishing the degree of flexibility that is appropriate and desirable.
- Clarify the ground rules. Certain moral and legal responsibilities will always remain with the principal. However, there are various ways in which different aspects of leadership will be exercised by a wide range of people.
- Be willing to negotiate the distribution and use of power and influence, and the processes of decision-making.

- See any exploration of distributive leadership as an opportunity to encourage collaboration amongst all teachers.
- Explore ways in which distributive leadership can provide specific opportunities for professional development of staff.
- As with any new development, decide on strategies for encouraging and supporting individuals who, because of such factors as anxiety or temperament, are suspicious of change.
- Remember that, in the final analysis, distributive leadership should strengthen the whole-school focus on quality learning and teaching. All organisational functions serve this core dimension of school life.

Conclusion

Distributive leadership should not be seen as a discrete organisational strategy. Rather, it is range of practices and initiatives which reflect a mindset linking support, collaboration, initiative, shared understandings and purpose, manageable workloads and school improvement. Its natural home is within a truly authentic educational community whose focus is learning and teaching.

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